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BIOGRAPHY.

BY WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.

BIOGRAPHY is that branch of history which has been cultivated least successfully. The annals of civilization cover twenty-five centuries, but how few are the first-rate biographies! Is this because Biography is the final product of History, as Portraiture is of Painting?

Plutarch, the supreme ancient biographer, flourished at the close of Rome's imperial expansion, long after the golden age of Greece had become only a memory. He drew the portraits of the most conspicuous public men of seven centuries, with an art so excellent that he can still teach us much. He opens to our view not only the individual careers which made and unmade empires, but also the familiar concerns of classical antiquity, the life of the household and shop and market, the anecdotes, the superstitions, the customs and rites. Had Plutarch's books been lost, we should have lost more of the human than Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus could ever supply.

So, too, the Old Testament has gained its immense hold over later peoples, not merely because it contains the religion of the Jews, but because it abounds in biography. Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Saul, David, Joshua, and how many more, are drawn with such unsurpassed fidelity that a child recognizes the lifelikeness and a philosopher wonders at the perfection with which they typify phases of universal human nature. Can we suppose that, if the tale of our modern biographies were closed, we should hand down to readers two thousand years hence such treasures as we find in the Old Testament and in Plutarch?

And yet individuality never took more varied shapes, it was never more interesting, than in the nineteenth century, which produced specimens of almost every type known to earlier ages,

besides adding, in great profusion, new types of its own. One reason why we have overlooked this growing richness in individuality is that we have been absorbed in watching the formulation of the doctrine of evolution, the capital achievement of the century—the doctrine in which, when first posed, the individual seemed to wither and the world grew more and more. In the fathomless vistas it revealed, the single human life shrank to a speck. Individuals were studied, not for themselves, but as links in the numberless chains that stretch from the Unknown to the Unknowable. Not the man, but his pedigree; not the specimen, but its series; not the idiosyncrasy, but the likeness, were all in all. It followed naturally, when historians took a survey through this cosmic telescope, that with them too the collective should prevail over the special. The career of a tribe, a nation, a race; the growth and decay of institutions; the birth and flowering and death of religions, philosophies, politics, arts; the mystic importance of the soil out of which all springs, and of the climate which each must breathe—these are the topics which have chiefly engrossed historians during the past fifty years. Bent on discovering general principles, or at least on tracing the continuity which endures beyond the individual life, they have rightly disregarded the exceptions; and the result of their labors is such that no eulogy can overpraise it.

The fascination of treating history in this way is intense. How proud a thing it is for mortals, whose earthly term is but a span, to range through time, lording it over centuries or millenniums, as the astronomer ranges through space! We crave to know principles, and, having discovered them, to reduce this miscellany of a world to order; but life is far deeper than the principles by which, at one period or another, we interpret it. And when the eager search for them tends to abstractions, let the historian never forget that life is always concrete. Before he can deduce one general law, he must have understood many particular instances: whether he will or not, the historian is thrown back on biography, on the investigation of the careers of individual men.

The historian of a long period, or of an institution, or of a great movement, chafes at the intrusion of individuals: they interrupt his logical sequence; they force him to abate and qualify. Trusting to his evolutionary formula, he believed that he could predicate of mankind in the mass principles as certain as those of

the mathematician. Very good! But behold Cæsar! behold Mahomet! exceptions to all rules, who plunge in and smash his calculations! There is danger of becoming too cosmic, of seeing human history from a height so remote that it bears no more resemblance to flesh-and-blood facts than a map bears to a continent. The Infinite, because infinite, probably sees only individuals: the generalizing process is the device by which we finite men make up for our lack of omniscience, and manage to deal with multitudes of facts, which, taken separately, would overwhelm us. For fifty years and more, the pursuit of the cosmic has absorbed our best endeavors: the extreme on that side has been touched: the pendulum begins to swing back. Almost unperceived, there is a return to the study of the concrete, of the individual, of the infinitesimal, down to microbes, atoms, electrons. After the cosmos, man interrogates again the microcosm. The dawn of Biography is breaking.

I would not imply, of course, that Biography is more honorable than History; they are not rivals but allies. I wish simply to suggest some of the many reasons why the future of Biography is so promising. An adequate survey of this art, in which we should see the growth of skill in the artists and the changing fashions in the art, has yet to be made.*

In Biography, just as happened in poetry, in painting and in sculpture, the capacity to depict imaginary personages came long before portraiture. The earliest efforts are, almost always, stiff, conventional, Byzantine, not individualized. After a while the public craves more human details, or the biographer has a knack at hitting off a likeness; and so the art gradually increases in efficacy till it is worthy to serve a Plutarch or a Boswell.

We must always bear in mind not only the biographer's skill, but the ideal which he set himself. For centuries fashion prescribed that distinguished personages should be portrayed in their robes of office, just as kings were painted with their crowns on. Nothing was told about them inconsistent with their supposed character. See how little the quaint and delightful Izaak Walton lays bare the real man in his life of Dr. Donne or of Sir Henry Wotton. He introduces us to a worthy, conventionally pious

* Let me remark, parenthetically, that none of our universities, although some of them now offer hundreds of courses and subdivide each subject into very slim sections, has included Biography among its electives, either in History or in Literature.

divine, and to a high-bred, rather solemn diplomat; yet we know that both of them were full of human nature. Nor did Boswell's example, a century and a half later, break up this tradition. Sparks, in his desire to record nothing inconsistent with what he imagined Washington ought to be, made a mummy of him. The Washington whom I read about in my history at school never seemed to me more real than the wooden Indians which used to stand in front of cigar-stores. Years afterwards, I came upon this statement by one of his officers: "It was at Monmouth, and on a day that would have made any man swear. Yes, sir, he swore that day, till the leaves shook on the trees. Charming, delightful! Never have I enjoyed such swearing before, or since. Sir, on that ever-memorable day he swore like an angel from heaven." These words sent a thrill of satisfaction through me, for they proved that Washington was once alive; and I went on to make his acquaintance.

The fashion of so dehumanizing great men that nobody could believe in their existence, led to the production of memoirs, letters, *chroniques scandaleuses*, in which one sought for evidence, rather sleazy at times, of the human. Latterly, the tide has set so strongly in this direction that now biographers tell everything. Your true German biographer will give you a chapter on Goethe's shoe-buckles, with details as to their cost and size; statistics of the silver-mine from which the metal came; the pedigree of the smith who made them; and, in an appendix, you will find a treatise on the history of foot-wear. No man is a hero to his valet; judging by recent examples, I suspect that valets have turned biographers. And yet this extreme is less harmful than the other; at least, it bespeaks life instead of death. Much of the best biographical work at present is done in disinterring great men, who, like Washington, had been mummified and laid away.

The most lasting interest which we have is our interest in our fellows. Be they great or be they small, we know men and women as individuals, each with his peculiar legacy of form, feature, gesture, character, actions. One attracts us, another repels; but we cannot shake ourselves loose from our interest in them. And so, after we have read History, which perforce blurs the individual in its effort to define the great tides of evolution, we turn again to Biography in order to hear human voices; to catch, if may be, the glance of human eyes; to be reassured that, whatever the

events, they were woven of the passions of men and women, dead now, indeed, but once glowing with life. Unless the past be revived, why should it concern us? Little care we for the philosophy of the twelfth century: but hear Héloïse from her convent prison cry out thus to Abelard: "I have renounced life, and stript myself of everything; but I find I neither have nor can renounce my Abelard. Though I have lost my lover, I still preserve my love. O vows! O convent! I have not lost my humanity under your inexorable discipline! You have not turned me into marble by changing my habit; my heart is not hardened by my imprisonment: I am still sensible to what has touched me, though alas! I ought not to be!" This is a voice not from the distant past but from to-day. Harkening to it, Héloïse and Abelard live again for us, though their scholasticism be dead and gone.

The human touch—every true biography must have that. Recall how when Alcibiades had fled to Italy, some one asked him whether he durst not trust his native country, and he replied: "In everything else, yes; but in a matter that concerns my life, I would not trust even my own mother, lest she might by mistake throw in the black ball instead of the white." Come down twenty-three centuries, and listen to General Grant describing his fear as he led his first regiment in pursuit of the enemy: His heart did not resume its place, he says, until it occurred to him that Harris, the Confederate general, "had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him. This was a view of the question I had never taken before; but it was one I never forgot afterwards. From that event to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting an enemy, though I always felt more or less anxiety." The human touch that makes the whole world kin, Grant has it in this passage.

And, to cite one more illustration, St. Augustine tells us that his mother, St. Monica, wished him to defer being baptized a Christian until he had sown all his wild oats; believing, as she did, that that sacrament would wash his soul clean up to date, so that if he received it too early he might commit other sins which it could not purge. How naïve! What a delightful mixture of motherly solicitude and pious thrift! What light it throws on the sainted woman's conception of the bargain of conversion! We remember that human touch in St. Augustine's "Confessions," long after his religious experiences have become indistinct.

The human touch—truth to nature—let a biography have that, and it matters not how humble its subject may be. The great captain, whose prowess dazzled his contemporaries, may pale and fade away before the poet, the discoverer, the artist, when their lives come to be written. Rousseau's "Confessions" and Boswell's "Johnson" have been knit, for very different reasons, into the tissue of millions. And by virtue of this human touch, the material for Biography is as unlimited as Democracy itself.

Moreover, our interest in the human goes on steadily increasing. Not satiated by actual men and women, we explore the imaginary world which the romancers in prose and verse create. And here it is worth noting that the unprecedented advance in the art of fiction during the past century has followed the universal democratizing spirit, until now the heroes of novels are not drawn from kings and peers but from any class, high or humble, and that they dwell neither in Fairy Land nor in Castles in Spain, but amid our every-day life. Biographers have not kept pace with novelists in skill to reproduce the actual man; they still work too much from the outside; they should live in the heart and brain of their hero and let us see the very springs of action: for the demand for veracity, stimulated by science and by fiction, has grown so keen that readers will no longer tolerate the old school of biographers, who thought it indecorous to show their subjects in anything less dignified than full dress.

At present, thanks to its finer skill, Fiction has the cry: but under its highest aspect Biography possesses this incalculable advantage over fiction—it is boundless. The masterpieces of the imagination are forever pent within the confines prescribed to them by their creator—we can add nothing to Macbeth, but accept him and try to understand him as Shakespeare chose to draw him: but the great personalities of actual life elude final definition. I no more believe that a definitive biography of Lincoln will be written, than that the world will agree as to the nature and teaching of Jesus Christ. This elusiveness, as of a beautiful horizon always tempting yet never attained, gives to Biography a perennial charm.

One technical reason why Biography will become popular is obvious: the mass of material about modern times is so enormous that to write an extended history, based on original sources, will soon become impossible. The late S. R. Gardiner filled sixteen

large volumes with his account of England in the first half of the seventeenth century; the future historian who shall attempt to write a history of England during the last half of the nineteenth century will be confronted by ten times more material than the laborious Gardiner had to sift, and his work, if finished, would swell to one hundred and sixty volumes. The lives of great men, even of octogenarians like Bismarck and Gladstone, can hardly be buried under such mountains. Napoleon is, perhaps, an exception; for the material about him is fast surpassing the stretch of one man's industry, although, by judicious selection, the pith can be digested more easily than appears. But history, told through the career of a great man—Cromwell, Washington, Cavour—gains in clearness and human interest far more than it can lose through the tendency of a biographer to exaggerate the personal influence of his hero. Two judges will never agree as to the reaction between the great man and his environment: nevertheless, we shall come nearest to the truth when we take great men at their full value.

For what is the upshot of all life on this earth, from the lowest organic creatures up to Shakespeare and Cæsar, but a crescent manifestation of Will? Among animals and among primitive human beings, Instinct predominates: but, as we ascend the scale, Volition—the deliberate choosing of one policy rather than another, the doing of each deed with intelligent purpose—comes more and more into play. From each accession of this mysterious power, there spring new variations of personality, until Will reaches its highest expression in Great Men. Does not history confirm this? In the most ancient empires, the millions lived almost wholly by instinct, submissive to monarchs who ruled by whim or wilfulness, which is very different from will. But when into a little tribe of Jews this magic sap was poured, it produced among them more striking personalities than the innumerable swarms of Babylon, Egypt and Chaldea had seen. Later, Greece bore within the compass of a century her brood of men great in action, great in thought, great in art, great in character.

If we measured at each period the relative amount of Will and Instinct in each people, we should see more clearly the influence of Great Men. We should see also how, when the acts of Great Men have through imitation been crystallized into institutions, the free expansion of Will is almost invariably checked and a sort of

secondary Instinct,—that is, Custom, which blindly accepts the institution,—is substituted for Will. Since complete self-expression through the Will, guided by reason and morals, is the ideal towards which mankind slowly toils, every institution becomes a clog from the moment when it restricts the service of its members to the running of its own machinery. Tyranny of whatever kind stands eternally condemned, not because it may be cruel, but because it strives to hold men down to the lower plane of Instinct, whereas all the guides to the spirit bid them rise to the higher plane of Will.

Now, Great Men are vessels or batteries in which are stored vastly larger quantities of Will than average men possess. This power they exercise in many ways. Sometimes they draw the masses after them, as a magnet draws steel shavings; sometimes they compel; sometimes they educate. Let us not forget that the masses are plastic, very little endowed with Will, though often surcharged with passions. They do not always respond to the Great Man's call, and when they do they are not always pleased to crown him. Nevertheless, history presents us a succession of causes, each of which seems, to the popular mind, to have been embodied in some transcendent personality.

One school of modern historians have persistently denied this. Fixing their attention on the long stages of evolution, they belittle or ignore the individual. The man of genius they explain as being merely the product of his time. Dante, they say, did not appear alone: he had Guinizelli, Cino da Pistoja, Lapo, Cavalcanti and others for contemporaries; and his work differed from theirs only in being a little better. As if the merging of an army of Cinos or Guidos could equal one Dante! We measure him not by what he had in common with them, but by what he had and they had not—that residuum was the product not of his time but of himself. The qualities which make Shakespeare Shakespeare could never be compounded by taking this gift from Marlowe, that from Jonson, a third from Webster, and so on through the Elizabethan line.

When they come to political history, these historians see movements but not men. Fatalism, of the lower depressing sort, haunts them. In the largest sense, we are all fatalists: but in our daily affairs and in our moral life we cannot be, for Conscience and Will are undeniable facts, even though they too be regarded as manifestations of universal Fate. Since Destiny operates through

the human will, surely the historian should learn all that he can of the few men through whose will Destiny shapes the course of human affairs at each epoch. The fatalists say that, in the evolution of modern Europe, "Napoleon was a negligible quantity," thereby assuming that the result would have been the same if he had never lived, because some other soldier would have leapt into the saddle and ridden the Revolution. This is mere speculation, which is not the historian's province. But examine it a moment. What are the facts? Dumouriez, Augereau, Hoche, Moreau and many another soldier of the Revolution could not leap into the saddle. Napoleon could and did. Our business, therefore, is not with what might have happened if Napoleon had never lived, but with those special gifts which enabled him to achieve what the rest could not. He did not create the Revolution, but he had the genius, and he alone, to tame it to his private glory. The fatalists urge that circumstances and the right moment really determine: on the contrary, the moment becomes right when genius chooses it. How many times between 1792 and 1795 were circumstances at Paris ripe for such a stroke as Napoleon delivered on the thirteenth Vendémiaire! Till then, it was the man, and not the conditions, that lacked. Or take another example. At the battle of Cape St. Vincent, out of twenty British captains, Nelson alone left the column, made straight for the foe and crushed him. Shall we pretend that Nelson's presence was of no consequence, that if he had not been there, some one else would have displayed his audacity?

I would not imply, of course, that Great Men can exercise their qualities to the full unless conditions be favorable. Many born out of their time, too early or too late, reveal only a potential greatness. The largest dynamo must have the proper conductor through which to drive its power. Had fortune smiled, Doge Andrea Dandolo might have been the centre of such a golden age at Venice in 1350 as Lorenzo the Magnificent actually patronized in Florence in 1490; for Dandolo was Lorenzo's equal in personal culture. Conversely, not every cause has its leader: witness the Crusades. Never before or since has Western Europe been so stirred by a common purpose; and yet, for lack of masterful guidance, one crusade after another either failed outright or gained only a transient success. The masses are imitative, but how can they imitate greatness if its pattern be not revealed to them?

Many a historical crisis hinged on some apparently slight biographical fact. At the siege of Syracuse, there was a moment when the Athenians, whose position had become untenable, could have retreated: had they done so, the outcome of the Peloponnesian War might have been reversed. Why did they not retreat? Because on the fatal night an eclipse occurred, and Nicias, their general, refused to stir. The next night was too late. The destruction of the Athenian power turned, therefore, on the superstition of one general; for there were other generals whom the eclipse did not overawe. Thus does the personality of men tinge events. We must know not merely a man's politics or religion, his generalship or courage or his whims and vices, but his physiology as well. Frederick II put back to land and abandoned his crusade because he could not endure seasickness. The French lost the fruits of Borodino because, on the evening of the battle, Napoleon had a physical collapse which prevented him from giving orders to pursue the Russians. But for epilepsy in youth, which turned him from a worldly life to the priesthood, Giovanni Mastai Ferretti might never have been crowned Pius IX. Lincoln's humor, so sadly misunderstood during the Civil War, is now seen to have been an essential element in his character, enabling him to shoulder for four years the most herculean burden laid on a modern statesman. I cite illustrious examples, but to the biographer no trifling personal trait is negligible.

The importance of the body as the basis of personality is too evident to require comment. The cause of many acts which have altered history is to be sought in the physiological condition of this or that man. Unfortunately, our records are very meagre, and furthermore medical science has not yet reached that state of precision where it can assert positively that a fatal chain of cause and effect connected given pathological symptoms and established deeds. Frederick the Second's seasickness, which put an end to a crusade, is a capital example of the temporary control of the will by the body. In innumerable lives we perceive how disease checks or distorts or clouds nature. We see plainly enough that opium ruined the magnificent genius of Coleridge, debasing a poet on whom nature had lavished almost all her gifts into a spinner of "Church of England cobwebs," and a metaphysician who spent his energy winding and unwinding endless rolls of German philosophy—as a juggler, after showing you that his

hat is empty, conjures clouds of tinsel out of it, causes them to disappear, and then shows you the empty hat again: there was nothing before, there is nothing now. Not less real, although often more subtle, has been the action of disease. The intellect, as in the case of Leopardi or Pascal, may do its work unimpaired in spite of a broken-down body, yet we cannot help feeling that his frightful physical condition determined Leopardi's pessimism, however staunchly he denied it. The same disease, of course, affects different persons differently, because deeper than the corporal wrap is the temperament. Parkman was a victim of nervous exhaustion which has certainly not been exceeded in violence or duration among literary men; but it could not hinder him from producing those twelve volumes of history in which you will seek in vain for a sign of weakness. And there are maladies—consumption, for instance—which seem actually to favor creative writing, as if, in compensation for enfeebling the body, they clarified or etherealized the mind. Witness the lives of Keats and Lanier, of Symonds and Stevenson.

The work in this field of the physiologists, led by Lombroso, has been salutary, although we may well question the rigidity of their conclusions. Recently, such investigations as Dr. George M. Gould has described in his "Biographical Clinics," on the origin of the ill health of De Quincey, Carlyle, Darwin, Huxley, Browning and others point the direction in which medical specialists will turn. We must not, however, concede too much to pathological conditions; that is the error of those who accept too strictly Professor Lombroso's conclusions. Any process which tends to regard genius and insanity as synonymous has itself an insane taint. The morbid psychologists refer all their comparison to the Normal Man; but, when we look closely, we find that the Normal Man is an imaginary being to whom all actual men are exceptions. Once on his guard against confiding too implicitly in the infallibility of scientific apparatus, a perfect biographer should be keen to investigate this side of his hero's life, and to compute the influence which constitutional or chronic ills may have had upon it. By singular good fortune, Boswell had in Johnson a subject whose morbid strata were so apparent that, although Boswell does not write from the modern pathologist's standpoint, yet he discloses to any intelligent reader the source of many of Johnson's idiosyncrasies.

From psychology, too, the biographer will get much aid; yet it is by no means evident whether the real advance in our knowledge of the human equipment will not come through pathology rather than through psychology. Are we not a little imposed upon by new names for old things when we listen to many of the so-called discoveries of the psychologist? We have learned to talk glibly of "reactions," as if they explained anything. We know how long it takes for a pin-prick to be felt, a noise to be heard, a flavor to be tasted; we have photographs of the face in wrath, joy, pain, grief: but have we got any nearer the inner cause? Are these more than studies of the outside, registrations of the bodily vehicles of sensation? To be able to state in what fraction of a second the electric current flashes along the telegraph-wire from Boston to New York, or how many volts it has, tells absolutely nothing about the message it carries, or of the person who wrote the message. If you could put Shakespeare and Dante through the tests of the algometer, would you understand their genius a whit better? Psychology cannot yet penetrate to the causes of personality; but such aid as it can give, the biographer will gladly avail himself of. He will certainly be helped by it to scrutinize his subject more closely, to look in out-of-the-way places for indications of character, and perchance to confirm what pathology has suggested; and he will remember that this science, which is still in its infancy, may have a splendid future. Let him also bear in mind that saying of our master psychologist to-day: "Our knowledge is as a drop, our ignorance is as the ocean."

The truth-loving biographer will welcome the instruments which modern science puts in his hands, but he will beware of trusting them too far. Next to a religious revival, nothing is more likely to promise what it cannot fulfil than a scientific theory just broached. You think you have in it a key to the universe; you discover at last that it simply fits a new-fangled lock to your old front door. If you start with the purpose of proving a doctrine, you will surely fail. Taine, in so many respects the most important French mind of his time, more than once came to grief when he tried to apply his theory of the "moment" and the "environment" to special cases. Trusting to his formulas, he insisted that Alfred Tennyson must have grown up amid luxurious surroundings, and given himself over to a voluptuous life. The

truth was, of course, that Tennyson was the son of a poor clergyman, that until forty years old he lived most frugally on a few hundred dollars a year, writing his poems in the blank leaves of a butcher's book. Yet Taine was so sure that poetry so gorgeous could not have sprung from such an environment, that he refused to believe the truth. Let the biographer, therefore, free himself from every theory of life and method: the only prepossession allowed him is admiration for his hero, since only by that can he possibly come to an understanding of his hero. In the long run, enthusiasm, though it result in exaggeration, serves better than disparagement to reveal the real stature of a man. Time will correct the enthusiast's magnification; but the belittler's underestimate merely measures himself. When a critic writes, "Emerson is not always as shallow as he seems," we suspect that Emerson's shallows will be deep enough for his critic to drown in.

Let us examine more closely the chief objection brought against the biographic treatment of history,—that it causes us to see human development out of focus. In studying the Napoleonic era, for example, the complaint is made that it transfers our attention from a myriad details of European society, law, politics, war and education, to the opinions and deeds of Napoleon; so that presently we begin to imagine that these colossal facts have only secondary importance compared with what he willed. The evolution of a nation, these plaintiffs might say, may be compared to the growth of a forest, whose millions of trees belong to the same species and have a common stock of soil and climate; how inexact to regard the one giant pine which, thanks to some slight favoring inequality of condition, overtops the others, as if it were of a different higher species. Under similar conditions, any one of its fellows might have grown as tall. Just as the scientific study of the individual, if pushed too far, results in the creation of a fictitious Normal Man, so the doctrinaires who "account for" great men on the theory that they are as wholly the product of their time as trees are of soil and climate, are forced to create a more or less imaginary "time" to produce them. They pick out certain elements of Dante's time, let us say, and frame them into a machine which could not help making Dante; and then they triumphantly assure us that they have "accounted for Dante." But surely this machine, so vast and intricate, composed of all the actual hopes and deeds of that age, and of all the traditions which

it kept alive from the past, ought to have produced nothing but Dantes, a whole population of Dantes, instead of a single specimen: in fact, however, it produced a Boniface VIII, a Cavalcanti and innumerable other strongly individualized persons unlike him and mutually unlike. This is as if, after we had been told that a century-plant puts forth only one flower before it dies, we should find it bearing roses, violets, goldenrod, deadly nightshade, and scores of other varieties, season by season. The Normal Time, be it that of Cæsar or Charlemagne, of Hildebrand, Dante or Luther, of Washington or Bismarck, is a fiction which might be respected if it did not cause so much misunderstanding. Every sophomore is provided with stock explanations which he firmly believes explain, and, what is worse, his teachers believe it too. We all have our store of cant phrases—"ages of faith," or "of doubt," "the age that built cathedrals," "the scientific age"—with which we instinctively mask our ignorance: as if everybody in the twelfth century built cathedrals, or everybody in 1850 was a doubter! It has become the fashion to select some trait and write a history round it. Versatility was a characteristic of the Elizabethan age; the American emigrants came out of that age; therefore Professor Wendell twists American literature into such shape that it seems to be the continuous revelation of Elizabethan traits. But he labors in vain: "The Day of Doom," Cotton Mather, Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, Joel Barlow, and so on down to Bryant, Irving, Cooper and their successors, were not in the least Elizabethan. One might more plausibly trace the decadence of English statesmanship during the past half-century to the vacuous fashion of wearing a monocle, which, of course, precludes seeing clear or straight; or the decadence of the French to their high-heeled boots, which render a solid footing impossible.

The practice of assuming the conditions that you need to "explain" a celebrated man has gone so far that those who have it do not see its absurdity. It makes writing easy; it gives a certain pleasant air of superiority to a critic or historian; it encourages him to think that he has indeed been permitted to peep behind the veil, and see the causes of things. How confidently Mr. Mabie, for example, discourses in his recent essay on Poe:

"Emerson, Lowell, Holmes, Whittier, Bryant, Irving, and, in certain aspects of his genius, Hawthorne, might have been predicted; reading

our early history in the light of our later development, their coming seems to have been foreordained by the conditions of life on the new continent; and, later, Whitman and Lanier stand for and are bound up in the fortunes of the New World, and its new order of political and social life. Poe alone, among men of his eminence, could not have been foreseen."

Wonderful, Mr. Mabie! You say in 1899 that you could have predicted in 1839 the coming of all these authors except Poe—and a part of Hawthorne! Why except these? To claim everything would cost you nothing! But since you were debarred from winning the prophet's crown in 1839, as you had not then been born, why do you not tell us who are foreordained to be the great American writers twenty years hence? or why did you not, in 1885, reveal so evident a bit of predestination as that the next remarkable British author, Rudyard Kipling, should within five years emerge from a journalist's den in Benares? The Past belongs to nobody, the Present is pre-empted, but the Future is common property, and offers a fair field to predictions that may or may not be verified.

I cite Mr. Mabie because he passes for an authoritative critic; he simply is the victim of the prevailing system, which has come about from wrenching evolutionary doctrines out of their proper sphere. Take up almost any literary history, and you will find in it the same vicious results. The efforts of the literary historians to deal with romanticism, for instance, are amazing. They invent a formula which they proceed to apply to all writers of the first half of the nineteenth century. The same formula "accounts for" Shelley and Dickens, Byron, Bulwer, Tennyson, Mill, Macaulay, and all the rest. The epoch of Romanticism of course produced Romanticists. Keats was so indisputably a product of his time and conditions—have we not every-day proof that the sons of stablemen take to reading "The Faerie Queene" and classical mythology, and to writing exquisite poetry? If you but recall, it was the fine, rich, wholesome, barny fragrance of "Endymion" which charmed you!

The time will doubtless come when the fatuity of inventing general formulas to explain men of the most highly specialized and contradictory genius will be too patent to require demonstration. Then for an historian to clap the label "Romanticist" on three such different backs as Byron's, Carlyle's and Keats's will

be seen to be as absurd as to "account for" a camel, a cat, an elephant and a squirrel by saying that they are all quadrupeds; or to account for the oriole and the gypsy-moth by their environment because they inhabit the same elm-tree. Not science, but a mirage of science, causes these aberrations. Possibly, science may discover means now unknown to us for really fathoming the mystery of personality. If it does, we shall know why it was that, among seventeen Franklin children, one was Benjamin and the rest nobodies; or why, among scores of boys bred at Stratford between 1560 and 1575, one was William Shakespeare, and the others, so far as appears, had not one whit of his individuality. But until such means be discovered, let us refuse to be fooled by cheap and specious explanations; and let us not mistake for critical insight the prophesying to-day of things which happened before we were born.

I would not be misunderstood, however, in my endeavor to point out the delusions which flourish under the name of science. Nobody accepts more fully than I do the teachings of evolution, but it is because I believe them to be true, and invaluable in their proper place, that I protest against their misapplication. History must have some unifying principles. If we saw only individuals, the writing of history would be as impossible as to paint a landscape in which every separate blade of grass should be clearly defined. Broad generalizations become indispensable, and no one questions that each epoch—nay, each generation and decade—has certain distinguishing features. But the cardinal error comes when we begin to account for the men of genius, the few conspicuous exceptions, by the formula which we have agreed upon for their time. In general, it is perfectly safe to say that Germans have characteristics unlike those of Frenchmen; but we shall be mightily deceived if we expect every German and every Frenchman to exhibit his national characteristics. Who is your typical German?—Goethe? Schopenhauer? Bismarck? William II? And your Frenchman?—Is he Hugo? Thiers? Comte? Gambetta? Zola? Pasteur? There are Frenchmen saturated with what we choose to assume are the characteristic German virtues: so there are Germans not deficient in French *esprit*.

The truth is that the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the time, is not so single as we are apt to assume: hence, another cause of error, when we try to explain genius, or even ordinary men, by the *Zeitgeist*.

The same era affords sustenance for the most antagonistic personalities. The same *Zeitgeist* guided Leopardi into the Plutonian wilderness of Pessimism whence he never emerged, and Manzoni to the altar of the Roman Catholic Church, where he knelt devoutly all his life. The same *Zeitgeist* breathed round Newman and Mill, Jowett and Martineau, Clough and Maurice; nay, to drive the paradox home, all of us to-day are presumably undergoing similar general conditions, yet with such widely different results that we should resent the suggestion that we have been cast in one mould. The *Zeitgeist*, therefore, is as slippery and changeable as old Proteus—a convenient symbol for general attributes, but quite incapable of explaining individuals. And so we are brought by another path to the conclusion that we can best understand history by studying it through the lives of actual men and women. When we have once felt the plasticity of human nature, the infinite play of variation, the apparently boundless sweep of possibility, and the incalculable effects of Fortune, we shall discard any system which pretends to reduce the world to a series of pigeonholes, or men to marionettes, and which substitutes for the holy mysteriousness of life a garish hypothesis.

And so to conclude. The outlook for Biography, that branch of history which has hitherto been least successfully cultivated, was never more bright. Science constantly invents new instruments for measuring human faculty more accurately. The art of fiction has been teaching us to distinguish the nicest variations of character, and to trace the rack-and-pinion interaction of cause and effect. The issues of life were never more interesting. We stand on the threshold of a new era, in which the individual shall be magnified as he never was before. Pessimists say that Democracy—the railroad, the newspaper, and machinery—tends to reduce the world to a dead level of uniformity: that, as local variations fade away and racial characteristics are rubbed down, the commonplace, the dull, the vulgar, will more and more prevail. This I do not believe. The mighty agents which have been at work for a century have simply brought within reach of millions the necessities of material and intellectual life which could formerly be enjoyed by only a few. Can what lifted the thousands degrade the millions? These agents, properly viewed, win multitudes from the plane of Instinct to the plane of Will. As the size of the mass

increases, the field broadens from which the highest types can spring. Democracy means opportunity for variation, and variation is the cause of striking personalities, as the nineteenth century showed.

Since the material and the method exist, is it vain to hope that Biography, taking a fresh start, will go on improving until its masterpieces shall be as many and as excellent as those of the other great arts? May not the lives of real men be written as imperishably as the supreme creations of fiction? Shall Hamlet and Othello, Don Quixote and Tartuffe, shall the master creations of Hawthorne, Thackeray and George Eliot, of Turgenieff, Manzoni and Balzac, have no counterparts in Biography? The spell of the human reasserts itself. We cannot habitually satisfy ourselves with the cosmic point of view. We are not born to look at life through either telescope or microscope, but with our naked eyes. We are men: neither angels nor demons can interest us as much as our fellows.

WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.